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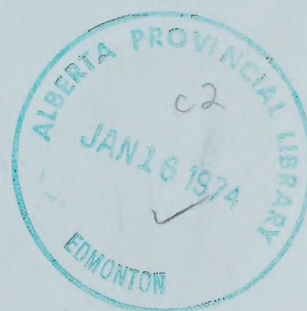
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Public Attitudes Toward Public Assistance
in Alberta. April 25, 1973. 2



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Public Attitudes Toward Public Assistance In Alberta

April 25, 1973



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HEALTH AND
SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT
Hon. Neil Crawford
Minister

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In August 1972 the Alberta Department of Health and Social Development released a Background Paper on Public Assistance to solicit the viewpoints and attitudes of the public. At the same time as requesting submissions from individuals and groups in the community, the Department contracted Socio-Systems Ltd. of Calgary to conduct a public attitude survey. This survey consisted of a questionnaire, mailed to over 5,000 randomly selected Albertans, followed by 223 interviews with persons randomly selected from the groups who completed the questionnaire. Response to the questionnaire was 47%. The results of this survey, which are similar to the public responses to the Background Paper, are summarized in the following pages.

Knowledge of Public Assistance

Over 30% of persons who completed the questionnaire said they knew almost nothing about public assistance. A total of 75% said they knew only a few things or less. People are generally responding to what they think ought to exist rather than to what does in fact exist.

The Deserving and the Undeserving

The questionnaire data showed that more than 75% of Albertans feel that the "deserving", that is the sick, the aged, and the single parent, should be treated differently from those able to work but unemployed. When asked during the interview, "Should the person who cannot work because of age or sickness get more public assistance than those who are able to work but unemployed?":

- 32.4% said Yes, much more,
- 45.2% said Yes, a bit more, and
- 22.4% said No, they should get less.

Assistance for the "really deserving", such as War Veterans Pensions, together with contributory schemes like the Canada Pension Plan and Unemployment Insurance, are not seen as either public assistance or welfare. Money for the "deserving", such as the Guaranteed Income Supplement and Manpower Training Allowances are public assistance. Financial assistance after Unemployment Insurance runs out is welfare.

The public believes that public assistance is not welfare when it is deserved. Almost half the population initially said the words welfare and public assistance were synonymous, yet their additional comments make it evident they see a difference.

Abuse of the Welfare System

Albertans believe that almost 30% of people presently getting welfare do not deserve that welfare, and are abusing the system. Almost one-third of the population feels that the extent of abuse exceeds 40%. The public appears to regard this as inevitable to a certain extent. Many complaints were received about the abuse of welfare, but they were not as vehement as the above figures might lead one to believe.

General Attitudes

None of the more common demographic variables such as age, sex, occupation, place of residence, or income are associated with attitudes toward public assistance programs.

During the interviews further attitudinal areas

were explored, with the following results:

Albertans feel that the government has a responsibility to ensure that all citizens have the basic necessities of life, regardless of circumstances (75%). *However, most also feel that people are responsible for their own lives; and that every person has a duty to save by himself for his own old age, disability, or retirement (58%).* Thus it is agreed that government should be involved in welfare programs (90%), but a significant group feel that only the "deserving" should get assistance — "the government should assist only those people who are unable to work because of age or sickness; the others must look out for themselves." (53%)

Albertans are optimistic about the future. Close to 90% do not believe there will be a war of near total destruction in the next 25 years; in fact, 87% feel that "it may be difficult, but with hard work most of the world's problems can be solved." The people feel this is one of the most exciting ages the world has ever seen and they are glad to be a part of it (92%). However, in spite of this general optimism and confidence they also feel that we are never going to be rid of the "poor"; they will always be with us (90%).

Albertans feel there is tremendous intrinsic value in work. In fact, they do not desire a world without work. Only 38% agreed that an ideal world would be one in which no man had to "work" in the sense of doing a job he did not enjoy — a world in which every man would be free to develop his own interests. It was felt that too much leisure and free time will spoil a society and that we need to work to keep ourselves alert and strong (90%). Similarly, man needs to work to protect his self-image and dignity (84%).

There was no strong pattern of association between these areas of more general attitude and demographic variables. Two minor exceptions are that those in rural areas feel people must accept more responsibility for their own lives (75% as compared to 51%), and that young people are more likely to accept an "ideal" world without "work" (60% as opposed to about 25%).

Single Parents

Being a widow or deserted mother with small children is regarded as a "job" — hence the mother is "unemployable" in the eyes of nearly half of those interviewed (48%). It would, however, be a good idea and quite fair to ask the mother to work part-time (68%). In fact, 86% feel that such people should be trained for work even while bringing up their families. Once the children have grown up and left home, the mother should find work, just like anyone else (85%).

Relocation for Work and Change of Job

87% of the public think that a person who is out of work but employable should have to take a job, even though that job might be outside his normal skills and different from any job he has ever done. Even the executive should have to take manual work if none other is available (83%). However, when it came to moving to a new location to take work only 54% of the questionnaire sample agreed that a person must make such a move.

The interview results demonstrate that this is a function of both the distance involved and the length of separation from the family. Some 72% agreed that a person should move, even to the far north, to take a job of short duration. Presumably the family would be left behind. When it comes to moving the whole family, demand for the move falls off as the distance increases. Hence 80% would demand a move to a job within the province, but only 51% would demand such a move to a place outside the province. In the case of the closing of a whole plant or industry people feel the government has a responsibility to both retrain (83%) and to relocate (66%) the workers involved.

The Use of Savings

The public is in favor of the proposed income test replacing both the means test and needs tests. Almost 75% of those interviewed felt that the frugal person should not be penalized for having saved. This is a stronger finding than the 54% of the questionnaire sample who felt that people should not have to use up their savings before they can get public assistance. The difference may reflect the wording of the two questions.

Similarly, a widow should not have to use up all her life insurance before qualifying for public assistance (80%). Comments indicate that a house, furnishings, and possibly a car are not to be used in the computation of assets.

Initiative

People who are on welfare for a long time are seen as losing their initiative (83%). In order to prevent this they should be encouraged, even required, to seek and find part-time work. Written comments revolved around the need for some sort

of sliding scale of incentives. The first substantial increment of money (about \$100.00) could be earned and kept in its entirety. Beyond that amount public assistance would be gradually reduced as the income rises. It is interesting to note that public assistance recipients who answered the questionnaire tend to be less inclined than other people to allow retained earnings.

Other Alternatives

Several alternatives to public assistance were raised during the interviews, based on comments in the questionnaire.

One of these ideas was that there should be no welfare at all for unemployed employable people. The government should rather pay all these people to go back to school and take further education or job retraining.

The responses indicate that the public sees education, particularly "practical" rather than "academic" education as a sort of cure — all for the unemployed employable. 47.5% of those replying support this idea without any reservation; an additional 34.7% support the idea with only minor qualifications. The strongest support is in rural areas (93%).

Another approach would be to directly provide jobs for everyone. The job of public assistance would be to find jobs for everyone; if necessary to create work. A total of 77% support this idea; 54.5% without any qualifications or reservations. This idea also finds its strongest support in the country and among those with less education and of lower occupational prestige.

Only 36% of those interviewed thought a guaranteed annual income was a good idea and should be implemented.

What Level of Government Should Administer Public Assistance Programs?

There is clear evidence that the public would rather see the province handle public assistance programs in preference to the municipalities or to shared administration. There is strongest support for the provincial administration of public assistance with local municipalities assuming responsibility for social services.



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